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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 JEDDAH 000380

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [KWMN](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#) [SOCI](#)
SUBJECT: COLLEGE CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS RIFTS ON WOMEN'S
EMPOWERMENT

REF: A. JEDDAH 000374
[1](#)B. JEDDAH 000347

Classified By: Tatiana C. Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Consul General's May 6 speech and participation in an Arabic-language roundtable at one of Jeddah's most prominent women's colleges highlighted both the increased public attention paid to promoting women's employment and the lingering controversy over such moves. Though generally praised by the Saudi and Pan-Arab press, the CG and the event organizers were targeted by an infamous Islamic web site for contradicting the Kingdom's traditional societal norms. In a follow-up discussion with the CG, however, the college's patron, Princess Lolwa Al Faisal, praised the CG's participation in this significant event and pledged to partner with the USG to hold a US-Saudi women's conference. She also cautioned that all preparations be handled through appropriate channels given the sensitivity of the issue. END SUMMARY

DIVERGENT SPEECHES ON WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

[1](#)2. (U) During the all-women Effat College's annual career day on May 6, the Consul General was one of four panelists for the discussion entitled "Against All Odds: Women on the Cutting Edge of Change," which addressed both the recent strides made by Saudi women in social and professional integration as well as the obstacles they continue to face. Her attendance had been previously approved by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) per direct request from King Abdullah that Mission officials receive concurrence from the appropriate SAG agency before public engagements. She was joined by Nashwa Taher, one of two women to be elected to the board of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) in landmark 2005 elections; Majed Gharoub, the chairman of the Saudi Law Training Center and a prominent Jeddah lawyer; and Qusai Filali, director of the labor office of the Jeddah Municipal Government.

[1](#)3. (U) In her speech, the CG described her personal career experiences and emphasized the importance of perseverance when proving her ability as a professional woman. She also noted the difficulty that women face in balancing their

careers and their personal lives. In the subsequent Arabic-language roundtable, she praised the recent progress made by Saudi women as they increasingly enter the work force and underscored that women should have the opportunity to exercise choice over their careers and personal lives as well as have the support and confidence of their communities.

¶4. (U) Speaking from her own personal experience, Taher joined the CG in applauding the women who continue to develop themselves professionally while also succeeding as mothers. The well-known businesswoman praised the government for its recent support for increased female participation in society and drew on the example of Muhammad's wife, Khadija, who was a merchant and property owner. Taher said that initiatives such as the Khadija bin Khawailid Center at JCCI, which provides job training and employee placement for young women, served as an example of the types of programs that should be developed in the Kingdom.

¶5. (U) Gharoub, however, remained cautious in his support for women professionals and recommended a more targeted approach to the integration of women into the work force, which would include both a revision of workplace regulations to allow women access to better jobs and community-wide discussions about which opportunities were "appropriate." He said that women should focus on fields that were "suitable to their dignity," such as medicine, management, and library science, rather than operating shops. This was in marked contrast to Taher's remarks and in particular to the example of Muhammad's wife's status as a merchant.

¶6. (U) Following up on Gharoub's mention of labor regulations, Filali described a program whereby supervisors from the municipal labor offices in Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam would begin visiting companies to verify that women's

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positions were in compliance with government regulations. Despite this adherence to what could be perceived as limits to women's professional freedom, Filali voiced his support for their continued integration into the work force and said that this is an essential element of Saudization efforts to decrease the reliance on expatriate workers.

PANEL ELICITS MIXED PUBLIC REVIEWS

¶7. (U) The May 6 event and the CG's attendance in particular won widespread praise from both the Saudi and the regional press in the following day's editions. The Jeddah daily "Okaz" reported on the CG's call for society to have confidence in the abilities of women and to trust that they will maintain their values while simultaneously pursuing their careers. The pan-Arab daily "Al Hayat" and the Abha-based "Al Watan" summarized the speakers' comments, though the former also reported on a series of technical workshops held later in the day. ConGen contacts expressed satisfaction at the CG's ability to participate in Arabic.

¶8. (C) By contrast, the infamous though popular web-based message board Al Sahat, which is frequently criticized as an extremist Islamist outlet (see reftel A), criticized both the College's decision to include the CG in the program and its encouragement of women's employment, though it was silent on the substance of the CG's speech and subsequent remarks. Derisive questions posted by different site members included, "Why was the American ambassador attending?" "Does this college respect the constitution of this country or is it above the constitution?" and "The college is practicing a suspicious act to expatriate our girls like the American university?" (Note: Though difficult to translate directly, the final comment is a figurative criticism of efforts to rob Saudi women of their traditional culture by exposing them to foreign influences. END NOTE)

TENTATIVE AGREEMENT ON US-SAUDI WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

¶9. (C) In a May 14 follow-up meeting with Dr. Haifa Jamal Al Lail, dean of Effat College, and Princess Lolwa Al Faisal, the College's patron and founder, the CG remarked on the criticism from Al Sahat. She added that the web site had published a photo from the May 12 shooting in front of the Consulate (see reftel B) and questioned how it was obtained. Princess Lolwa vigorously condemned many of the radical site's postings (including denunciations of her personally) and noted that one member had previously demanded the recall of former Saudi Ambassador to the US Prince Bandar bin Sultan for not condemning the Danish cartoons published last year that depicted Muhammad in a negative light.

¶10. (C) The CG inquired about the decision to include Gharoub in the May 6 panel, given that his support for professional women was somewhat tentative. Al Lail indicated that Gharoub had pressured the organizers to include him after a previously scheduled panelist, Princess Jawaher bint Majed, had to cancel.

¶11. (C) Princess Lolwa also highlighted the importance of women being able to express themselves, such as choosing whether or not to wear the "hijab" (the traditional head scarf for women). She linked this freedom of expression to the continuing development of women's education and proudly described to the CG her plans to build on Effat's success by opening three more women's colleges. She said that she is still awaiting preliminary approval from the Royal Diwan (the King's administrative office) and will then submit the appropriate paperwork to the MOHE.

¶12. (C) The CG noted the USG's continued interest in holding a Saudi-American Women's Conference, an idea that was first tabled during the inaugural US-Saudi Strategic Dialogue meeting in November 2005. Princess Lolwa said that Effat College would co-sponsor the event and asked for the USG to coordinate with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the MOHE on the proposal. She also requested that the USG wait to

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organize the event until after she could discuss it with the Saudi Ambassador to the US, Prince Turki Al Faisal.

¶13. (C) NOTE: Princess Lolwa is the sister of Prince Turki and of Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal, who are known to be two of the more progressive princes in the upper echelons of the government. All three are the children of the late King Faisal, who revolutionized the Saudi educational system in the 1960s by introducing universal primary and secondary education for women. END NOTE
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